

AROUND MIDNIGHT

Clete pulled the car into the dark driveway and killed the headlights and yanked the emergency brake into position. He leaned back in his seat and smiled and said to his wife Juanita, "Man, what a great night this was." Juanita held up the little trophy and replied, "Well, second place ain't bad, but I still think we shoulda won it."

"It" was the fifties dance contest down at The Club 101 on the old coast route. Clete and Juanita had taken second place with their light-stepping jitterbug to Elvis Presley's 'Paralyzed,' Juanita, with her superior weight, taking the lead. Butch and Evelyn — anatomical opposites of Clete and Juanita: Butch the stocky half of the duo, Evelyn a boney, rail-thin little thing — took first place with a smooth, stop-action twist to Buddy Holly's 'That'll Be the Day.'

"How could they take first?" Juanita complained. "I mean, the twist was the sixties, wasn't it? 'Round about '63 if I remember right." "Hell, Juanita," said Clete, closing his eyes and feeling the sweet fatigue down deep in his bones. "Who cares? I had a good time anyway." Juanita swung her door and climbed out of the car. "I'm going to take my shower," she said, a little peeved at Clete's positive outlook. "Yeah, yeah, go ahead," Clete said without opening his eyes. "I'll be in in a few minutes."

Juanita clipped around the front of the car, slid her key into the door and stepped inside the house. Clete rubbed his temples and then his eyes. Then he climbed out of the car and leaned back against the fender and looked up at the stars, at Orion, at the wash of the Milky Way.

"Beautiful," he murmured. Then a blood vessel burst in his brain and he slid down the shiny fender and fell to the ground.

Juanita dried herself in the steamy bathroom. She removed her partial plate and brushed it and then she brushed her real teeth. Clete hadn't arrived in the bedroom yet, and she thought he was out watching T.V. in the living room. She was hoping he'd want to make love to her; he usually did after a night on the town. She climbed, pantyless, into her flannel nightgown and slipped into bed to wait for him, but she was so tired from the dancing and the wine that she drifted off to sleep immediately.

Ginger, Juanita's little runny-eyed chihuahua, who had been asleep on the recliner in the living room, jumped down onto the rug and staggered toward the bedroom. But the front door that Juanita had left ajar caught her attention and she nosed it open and shivered out onto the porch. She

sniffed the air, smelling something familiar, and she followed her nose and found Clete lying in the driveway. She approached him cautiously, one slow, soft footfall at a time. She sniffed him from ankle (at the top of the driveway, pointing toward the house) to head (pointing streetward). When she reached his face, she sniffed that, too, and licked the spittle that flowed like bubbly lava from his mouth. Clete reached across himself and patted the little dog's head. He wanted to tell her to go get Juanita, but he couldn't find the words.

PINHOLE BLUES

Dawn broke as Clete lay in his driveway between the Buick and his wife's little green Datsun B-210. Ginger, his wife's tiny rodent of a chihuahua, lay on his chest, her chin on her paws, sleeping. Clete hadn't slept all night. The stroke that felled him as he leaned against his fender looking up at the stars had scared him shitless....

The right half of his body was useless, cut off from the neural messages from his brain by an aneurysm that had sprung a leak and squirted a stream of blood, like a needle-pricked water balloon, into his spongy grey cerebrum, saturating an area the size of a tangerine.

There were no words. He couldn't speak them; he had tried. Had tried to call his wife Juanita when he fell, had tried to say hello to Ginger when she wandered out and kissed his cheek with her warm wet tongue. And if somebody had spoken to him, he wouldn't have understood. Garbled noise is what he would hear.

The morning newspaper, tossed over the roof of a dented, wobbly-wheeled Yugo, hit the driveway at the left side of Clete's head and tumbled to its resting spot on the urine-dampened cement at his hip....

He and Juanita had been dancing down at The Club 101, and Clete had drunk five, maybe six, beers. Around about one o'clock, an hour after he fell paralyzed to the driveway, he had to pee. It was necessary. There was so much urine that, after it soaked through his pants, it seeped out onto the driveway and trickled down to the gutter and rolled toward the ocean, though it only made it as far as the mailbox before its source went dry.

About the time the newspaper hit the driveway, Clete's Juanita woke up alone in the bedroom. She went to the bathroom to pee, then pulled on her bathrobe. She shuffled, groggy and puffy-eyed, up the hallway to get Clete. She thought he had fallen asleep on the sofa in front of